

Rural Wisconsin Kids

By Charity Eleson, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

Wisconsin's rural kids face similar challenges and successes to the rest of Wisconsin's kids on most key indicators of quality of life. However, according to a recently released report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *City & Rural, Kids Count Data Book*, they are faring remarkably better than children living in rural areas nation-wide.

More than a quarter of our state's children, nearly 373,000, live in rural areas. According to the Casey report, on all ten indicators of child well being, including: poverty, children living with single parents, children without a phone or vehicle at home, those with difficulty speaking English, teen drop outs, homes where no parent has a fulltime job, parent are high school drop outs, teens not attending school and low-income homes where more than 30% of income is spent on housing Wisconsin's rural kids rank at or above children state-wide.

At the same time, fully one fourth of children—nearly 90,000 children—in rural Wisconsin live in working poor families. Working poor means a family is living on an income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level or earning less than \$31,340 for a family of three. At a fundamental level, all low-income families require connections to economic opportunities, supportive and effective services, and a strong community network. Wisconsin's children and families are no exception.

Wisconsin's rural children achieve success where their national counterparts struggle in part because of the strength of their local governments, school boards and a commitment of parents and the State of Wisconsin to providing a strong education. Early childhood education investments in state grants to quality day care providers, tuition assistance to low-income families and four-year old kindergarten available to many children statewide has helped make rural children prepared for school. School breakfast programs provide the fuel children need to be ready to learn. Strong public schools with a healthy investment from the state and local taxpayers as well as well-educated and mentored teachers provide the base for a strong educational system.

Wisconsin's rural children are doing much better than their counterparts nationwide. This success compared to other children in many of the nation's small towns, is a testament to the quality services and education available to Wisconsin children in rural communities. But, political priorities threaten to pit the well being of children against special interests in Wisconsin. Our children struggle to hold their own in this battle.

They will need strong advocates in all of our communities, including rural Wisconsin, to continue to keep a quality of life similar to their peers. Children need to be economically secure, their families need health care and parents need programs that help them keep up with a changing workforce. Children need to be ready to learn with a strong system of early childhood education and four-year old kindergarten. That commitment to education and our future also means protecting our state's schools and the equal opportunity to learn that our state's constitution guarantees.

Clearly our economic success as a state for years to come is a burden placed squarely on our children statewide. Making wise investments to ensure our children are healthy, well-educated, economically secure and safe is the best investment we can ever make for our future in Wisconsin.

For more information about the ***City & Rural Kids Count Data Book*** or the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families visit our website at: www.wccf.org or call 608-284-0580.

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